

First Advent (A)
November 27,28, 2010

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St. Paul's on-the-Hill

Isaiah 2:1-5
Psalm 122
Romans 13:11-14
Matthew 24:36-44

Get Ready

Welcome, welcome to something new in church. Welcome to this first gathering celebration of Advent, which is not only the season of preparation for the coming of Christmas, but the beginning of our church year, by what we call our liturgical calendar. The dictionary definition of Advent is – “*the coming or arrival of something, especially of something extremely important.*” Just as there is a change in the air outside, a shift in the quality of the cold preparing us for winter, there is a bit of shift inside. The Advent wreath has been prepared with evergreens and candles representing the four weeks of Advent – 3 purple or blue candles and one pink. The liturgical vestments are blue and beautifully made to represent the hope that is the deep undercurrent of the Advent season. Our music is a little different, as we sing *The Magnificat*, Mary's song of thanksgiving at being chosen to bear the Son of God, and our readings are all chosen to *wake us up*—to the wonder and responsibilities of being created children of God. Advent marks a

quiet and reflective and deeply joyful celebration of the new chapter, the New Covenant, of our story as Christians, a waiting together for the Promise of God.

Our Advent prophet is Isaiah, who calls us to walk in the light of the Lord. Isaiah was speaking to the Israelites in exile in Babylon: those same Israelites who were the descendents of Abraham and Jacob; those Israelites God had saved from the bondage of slavery in Egypt and preserved in the Wilderness with manna from heaven and water from rocks under the leadership of Moses; those same Israelites who settled in Canaan in the land promised to them by their God; and those same Israelites who fell into generations of corruption and failure that led to their fall and bondage in Babylon. It was to these people that Isaiah is saying: God has not abandoned you—do not abandon God! Isaiah is speaking of the hope of a God who will arbitrate among the peoples, bringing peace, where the weapons of war will be transformed into tools for planting and gathering the harvest again. The Psalm we heard today speaks of a time when Jerusalem is at unity with herself, when there is peace within her walls, and where the people are able to go to the house of the Lord and worship freely.

From Paul's letter to the Romans we heard it is the moment to awaken from sleep, to look forward to the night turning into the day. He refers to *light* as armor

for us to wear, like a garment or uniform to remind us of who we are in Christ, and how we are to *be* in Christ. Jesus is trying to send the same message to his disciples in Matthew's gospel today: wake up, pay attention, something new is about to happen. Jesus was not telling them that a time was coming where they would literally be snatched up into the sky, as some have interpreted as what they call "the rapture." Jesus was trying to prepare them for their difficult not-so-distant future where they needed to begin to grasp the paradox of God's self-giving love. It would not be long after this passage in Matthew that Jesus begins his last journey to Jerusalem where he is to be killed, and where the worlds of his friends would be turned upside-down in a moment, as in the flood of Noah's time. Jesus did not want them to be swept away in despair, but to stand strong in their faith, to be prepared, to make an ark of themselves, and to wait with anticipation for the ultimate Promise of God—reconciliation with all of humanity through his Resurrection from the dead.

So Advent is all about being ready for the coming arrival of something extremely important—yes, for Christmas, but also about being ready for so much more—for the coming of God's kingdom within us. So how are we to get ready?

There is a small book of Advent meditations by Pamela Hawkins called “Simply Wait,” where she explores what it means to live in Advent around four words: *Anticipation, Patience, Obedience and Hope*. **Anticipation** is living in the space in-between what has been, and what is to come, and it is making room in that space for hospitality, for welcoming what is anticipated. Now that my children are “grown and gone,” meaning I am no longer responsible for getting them up in the morning, I anticipate their visits in ways that make me appreciate my Mother-in-Law, Miriam, God rest her soul. When I was a daughter-in-law doing the holiday visiting, especially with small children, it was such a hassle—packing, traveling, picking up fresh colds, and living under a roof where I would be treated like a child again myself. But for Miriam the anticipation of seeing her son and his family must have been huge. She began to cook weeks in advance, pre-freezing everything we would eat for an entire week’s visit. That this unfortunately took something away from her otherwise pretty good aptitude as a cook was lost on her. She planned so much that it seemed to me she scarcely enjoyed the visits, which to me were marathons of disrupted infant schedules and spoil-containment trips to the toy store. Now as I clean and shop for my children and my daughter-in-law, I realize my anticipation is about me and not about them. My joy at having them

close for just a while lights me up, and I fill that space of waiting with things that keep them close to my heart, things they barely notice as they are living in the moments of being away from their lives and schedules. How can we capture that Anticipation, that living in the *not yet* of the Promise of God? How can we fill ourselves with light for the Christ child who kicks and tumbles in the womb, preparing to be born again and again into a cold and broken world longing for his light and love? Where in our lives, within ourselves, can we wash and change the sheets, stock the pantry and vacuum the furniture to be ready for the coming of the Lord?

Patience—now here is a word I should not be preaching on. There is a reason for that old expression that someone or something is “as slow as Christmas.” Waiting for anything is hard in our world, though I imagine waiting has been hard throughout human history. These days we are almost *trained* to be impatient. Who remembers when you had to get up and walk across the house to answer the phone? Or get up to change the channel on the TV, or adjust the rabbit ears to get better reception? Or light a fire without duraflame logs, with matches? Or go *into* a bank or McDonalds to get what you needed? What about dial-up internet? And if anything goes wrong we have 911 with the expectation that they

will arrive to our aide in 3 minutes. We have worked hard in our culture to eliminate the need for patience, and at the same time have created systems which call up *impatience* with a vengeance: automatic answering systems with blind loops, voicemail, outsourced customer service, and self-checkout at the grocery store. If we cannot be patient in our daily transactions, how are we to be *patient* in waiting for God? Perhaps in our anticipation, we can spend time meditating on those ways in which we live in God's created world, within rhythms which have been constant through time: the seasons of the year, the falling of the leaves from the trees, the tides of the ocean, the length of a pregnancy that brings a newborn to term. There are things we cannot speed up or slow down, reminding us of God's presence and grace. Perhaps it is not we who need to be patient, but we who should be attentive to others who wait with patience: to be remembered, to be acknowledged, to be fed, to be forgiven, to be freed from abuse and oppression, or to hear the Good News that God's Love and Promise is for all.

Obedience is a word of challenge. It immediately conjures its mirror *disobedience*, from childhood, and the consequences that went with it. Obedience was a big word in Catholic school. Perhaps in an Advent context, obedience is not so much about *doing* something but about *hearing* something, as the sheep that

hears and obeys the call of its shepherd. How can we hear God's call to us this season—a call to God's will in our lives? Mary did not step up and volunteer to be the Mother of Jesus. She was called to be, and her acceptance of this call in joy and thanksgiving was her obedience. Her *yes* is the response of obedience that is loaded with anxiety *and* commitment, cost *and* fulfillment of all God has created us to be.

Hope is the summary word of the Advent story. Hope is light in the darkness. Hope is a stable lit by starlight giving our Savior a place to be born. Hope is the courage of Mary, and of Joseph, to stick together and tough out an impossible situation full of possibilities. Hope of new life is what keeps us going in a world marked by death and despair. Hope is that last bit of energy which is pure grace, with which we show love to another when we feel all but empty ourselves. Hope was in the “shoot that came out of the stump of Jesse” a promise that Israel would be reborn from exile, and that humanity would be reborn out of the darkness of its own making by a forgiving and redeeming God taking on the flesh and suffering of humanity. Hope is the promise we hold, that Jesus is near, that Christ will come again.

In days to come
the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
Many peoples shall come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD! AMEN